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ABSTRACT

While rapid shifts in the composition of student populations and increased governmental demands for accountability have underscored the importance of institutional research (IR) in community college management, most adminstrative literature still conceptualizes IR as a cybernetic, neutral, data collection function initiated in response to the decision-making process. Yet if IR professionals are to contribute effectively to the college, they should be free to suggest the administrative implications of research data and to participate in the policy-making process. While the IR office should leave policy implementation to others in order to avoid conflict of interest with its function as a policy evaluator, the office should be placed in the administration under the president's office and charged with initiating research and evaluation activities, planning institutional mission and goals development, and conducting cost-benefit and market analyses. IR practitioners should be trained in educational research techniques and they must be able to work closely with other members of the administration, serve as a linkage between the college and external information sources, and cooperate with the business office in establishing performance criteria for goal-related budgeting. Only through this active role will IR offices prove their cost effectiveness and their value to the institution. (JP)

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Institutional Research As An Active Agent In Community College Policy Making & Planning

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INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AS AN ACTIVE AGENT IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE POLICY MAKING AND PLANNING

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INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AS AN ACTIVE AGENT IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE POLICY MAKING AND PLANNING

PERSPECTIVE

For most community colleges, institutional research (IR) has been in existence for less than a decade. Its role and function in institutional administration are still in a state of flux, and due to its newness and historical origins, this uncertainty is likely to remain for the immediate future. Paul Elsner, writing in 1970, stated that "the role of research in the institution does not seem to have been subjected to much vigorous analysis."[1] In 1977, Alfred, Fremer, and Lightfield could say that "there has been no clear-cut consensus regarding the role of institutional research in community colleges as perceived by presidents . . ."[2]

Typically, IR has been initiated at community colleges as an extra assignment for college administrators and faculty members. The part-time efforts have usually been directed at demographic studies, perhaps related to accreditation, campus expansion, or state funding requirements, and have been composed primarily of routine data collection and dissemination, questionnaire completion, and follow-up studies.[3]

During the past several years, more and more two-year institutions have reported the creation of full-time positions associated with IR.[4,5,6] Cohen pointed out in 1975 that as the number of full-time IR directors has increased, the quality of the studies has improved and their scope has broadened to include such topics as community needs, job market projections, and career preferences.[7] Park had previously (1972) stated:

> *It is noteworthy that research and development in the community college are taking on new dimensions, that collection and analysis of pertinent information are directed to data that will have significant influence on decision-making . . . .*[8]

According to Cohen, the emergence of this profession is related to two major influences: a changing population and increased involvement of Federal agencies.[9]

As enrollments and institutions grew during the 1960s, there was an emphasis on growth management and capital expansion. The functions of institutional research were most likely handled by a combination of presidential assistants and the business office. But as enrollments began to decelerate and the growth cycle changed to one of no growth, and even decline, many institutions began to experience the dilemma of attempting to maintain budgets that behaved in a very fixed way with respect to expenditures against revenues, which were becoming increasingly difficult to raise. The continuing pressure for accountability from Federal agencies began to be augmented by internal pressure for improved efficiency and accountability (e.g., faculty organizations concerned about such practical questions as job security).

At the same time, the type of person who attended community and junior colleges began to change: the average age, the ethnic and women's populations, and the

relative number of part-time students increased, and many students had prior college experience. These rapid shifts in the makeup of the student body have created pressure on college administrations to determine and measure the needs of the "new student."

As the information requirements of both external and internal sources have grown, the need for sorting and reporting data has remained. But there is now a new need to utilize information for managing scarce institutional resources. More than ever before, college boards and presidents are operating in a competitive marketplace, requiring a business approach toward management.[10] This emphasis on businesslike management has brought with it a demand for management information systems, which can translate the available data into information for decision making relevant to short- and long-range planning. As a consequence, institutional research is moving from the background to the foreground in institutional management—and not without trauma. The rapid emergence of this additional major administrative role has been resisted. In some instances, faculty and other staff members see themselves as bearing the brunt of the administrative search for efficiency and perceive the research office as the causative agent, rather than as a management function established for institutional viability.

ROLE AND FUNCTION CONSIDERATIONS

In 1977, *The Community and Junior College Journal* published an article by Alfred, Fremer, and Lightfield on the growing role of institutional research.[11] Citing the strong external pressure on community colleges for accountability and evaluation, the authors put forth the premise that IR is becoming an increasingly important planning and management tool for institutional goal achievement, as opposed to its historical function of collecting routine data for predetermined decisions. At the same time, the authors noted a discrepancy between IR functions performed by research directors and the functions desired by college presidents. According to those presidents responding to the authors' survey, the four most prevalent functions performed were:

(1) Answering routine questionnaires;

(2) Coordinating information with state and Federal agencies;

(3) External reporting of HEGIS and other sources; and

(4) Data collection and interpretation.

The four functions identified most frequently by the presidents as ones that ***should be*** performed were:

(1) Institutional planning;

(2) Follow-up studies;

(3) Program evaluation; and

(4) The development of management information systems.

The prevailing functions of data management, as reported by the research directors, have grown out of external requirements for accountability from Federal and state funding agencies and the increased production of computer-driven data. The presidents' desired functions reflect the needs generated by changing student populations and declining resources. The latter functions indicate that what is wanted in these times of changing environmental influences is information for planning and decision making. In 1970 Nangle noted:

> *That there is first of all, a consciously recognized need—an imperative need—on the part of higher education for solid information which will help guide and ultimately aid in determining institutional destinies; secondly, that institutional research has perhaps the most critical role to play in meeting this need; and thirdly, that such a responsibility must in one way or another impinge directly upon the planning, management and decision-making functions of the institution.*[12]

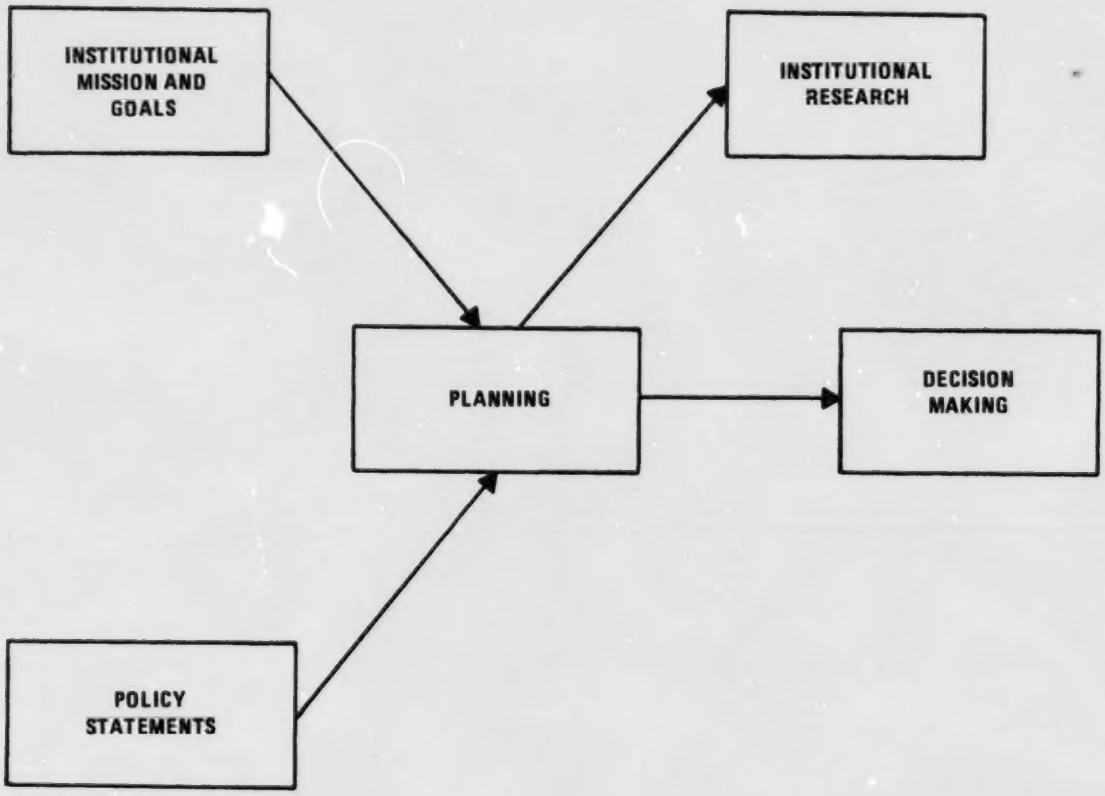
This statement summarizes the increasing emphasis on the need for information in planning, and continues the conceptualization of IR as objective, neutral, contributing data but not directly advocating policy or decisions. The picture of the IR office as a tool of management, and perhaps, the faculty, is prevalent in the literature of college management. Repeatedly it has been stressed that IR involves neutral collection and dissemination of information to be used by others in planning and decision making.[13,14,15,16,17,18,19] Models for IR typically show that it has a cybernetic or steering function for policy statements and institutional goals. ***Figure 1*** represents the modal viewpoint of the role of IR in community colleges. The communication lines in the model indicate that IR is typically seen as taking a reactive role, initiated in response to the decision-making process. IR is not conceptualized as initiating the development of goals and policy statements.

There are indicators, however, that along with its emergence as an important component of educational administration, IR is being conceptualized in a more active role in planning and decision making. For example, the failure of IR to make substantial contributions on and off campus has been blamed on a lack of follow-through after the results of studies are determined.[20] The very neutrality advocated by IR professionals may be the cause of ineffectuality. In other words, one has an obligation, once having arrived at a conclusion, to pursue the matter relentlessly. The key to success in IR is not neutrality but involvement.[21]

As early as 1964, Samuel Baskin, addressing the Fourth Annual Institutional Research Conference, said that IR needed to take a more active role in innovation and exploration of new program ideas in higher education, that it had to become an agent of change, the prodder of the establishment.[22] Going further, Perry conceptualized IR as a "third force" in higher education: an interface between internal educational commitment to self-declared objectives and those which represent external quantification

Figure 1

MODAL ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH
IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES



of standards, and a synthesizer of all that is representative of research in education and able to suggest what ought to be.[23] Thus, the conceptualization of IR as an active agent in institutional planning and decision making is not entirely new.

Figure 2 shows IR in a more active role in the institutional decision-making process. Alfred and Ivens (1978) conceptualize IR as having "a direct effect on decisions concerning institutional goals and purposes" and playing "an integral part in planning."[24]

Consonant with this viewpoint, research and planning for a decision is a "process that is often concurrent with the main feature of the decision itself. Effective research and planning becomes more than just a formative influence on decision making."[25]

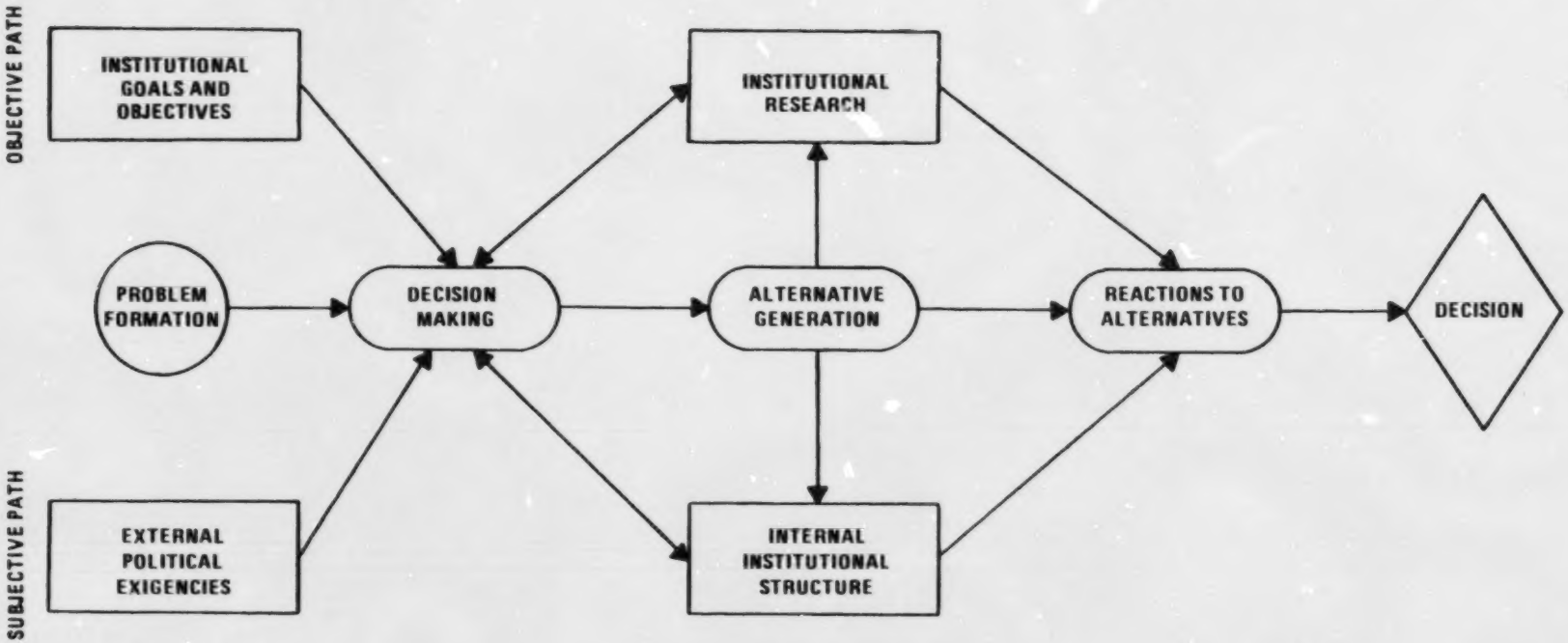
One way of playing a more active role in planning and decision making is to provide expertise in planning according to the abilities of the institution's management team. This expertise might be applied to the: recognition of situations requiring action; explicit formulation of problems; development of alternative solutions, including actions required and their consequences; understanding of solutions and acceptance of alternatives.[26] It may be a necessary preliminary to the active role for IR to help the institution formulate a conceptual basis before attempting to use an analytical approach to planning.[27]

Figure 2 depicts IR both receiving data from and providing data to the decision-making process of the institution. The function is not only cybernetic, it is also purposeful. While this conceptualization places IR in a central role in institutional planning and decision making, it stops short of including policy making. But IR cannot divorce itself from the process of institutional policy making. Tyndall has pointed out that "policy is in reality made at every level in an administrative hierarchy through the process of implementation. Rather than ignore or deny its involvement, IR should play an effective and major role in policy delineation."[28]

Unlike other administrators, the director of IR is responsible for the design and collection of information, its analysis and presentation, and usually its interpretation in the planning and decision-making process. The director is a synthesizer with a perspective that cuts across the more focused interests of the offices of instruction, students, and services. The failure of the IR director to suggest the policy implications of the research information may be seen as an abrogation of responsibility. The failure of the responsible decision-making body to include the IR director's opinion or to depend on his participation in policy making is to defeat a major value of the function of IR and to waste a professional resource.

To advocate that IR should become an active policy-making agent in community college administration does not mean advocating that it should become a line function. Nor does it imply that the IR director should supplant the college decision-making function and process. The IR functions will vary somewhat from institution to institution depending upon size and historical organizational patterns; but staying within the bounds of IR means that the functions will support institutional goals setting, policy determination, research studies, and evaluation of these efforts.

DECISION PROCESS DIAGRAM [1]



[1] From Alfred and Ivens, *A Conceptual Framework for Institutional Research in Community Colleges* (New York: CEEB, 1978).

Figure 2

A conceptualization of IR as an active agent in policy making is shown in *Figure 3*. The lines of communication flow through the IR office between the policy-making and the planning processes and the formulation of the institutional mission and goals. The IR director is thus an active broker functioning in the various college constituencies in collecting, producing, and disseminating information for the policy-making, planning, and decision-making processes. In such a role it is necessary that "Policy implications should be spelled out, and specific recommendations clearly made."[29] The active IR office is in an excellent position to perform a valuable service to the institution in a capacity of policy making, interpretation, and evaluation.

There is one large area of potential conflict in the active role of an IR office in policy making. The IR office should avoid policy implementation as much as possible to avoid a conflict of interest with its function as policy evaluator. As pointed out by Wedekind in 1964, IR "can be involved in formulation and implementation of process or the formulation and evaluation of process, but not all three."[30] Wedekind goes on to suggest that when IR does get involved in policy implementation it should be for a short and predetermined trial period and only if it is coupled with objective research—presumably external to the IR office—and only if the president cannot be persuaded otherwise.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

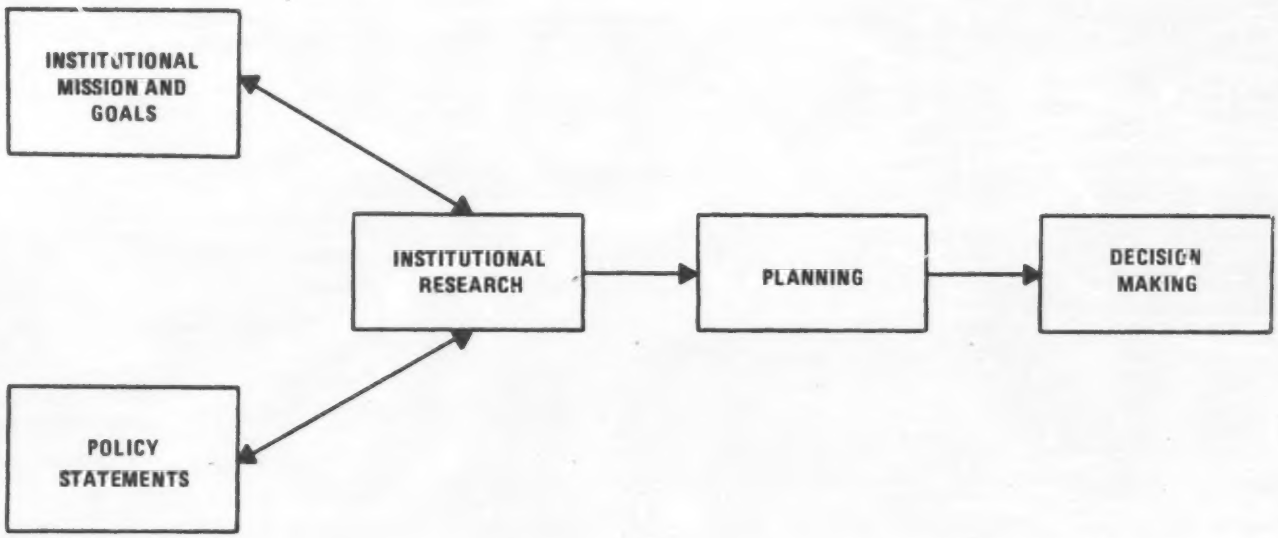
The question of just how IR should fit into the institution or organization is answered by one's perspective of the role of IR and its current stage of development in the institution. A research office that is mostly involved in routine data processing is unlikely to be viewed as a force in institutional planning or policy making. More often than not its director will report to a second in command as opposed to the president, chancellor, or provost. Research assignments are probably made vertically downward rather than through the active participation of the office with the institution's governance structure.

An informal review of *The Chronicle Bulletin Board* (1978) indicates that those offices that are involved in institutional planning, program evaluating, and MIS development are more likely to be organizationally placed directly under the president, with the title of vice president, vice provost, dean, director, etc. This is especially true if the functions included go beyond IR per se, such as facilities planning, personnel development, fund development, grants, and contracts. Size and type of institution obviously would also affect organizational placement.

The participation level of the research director in institutional planning and policy making is a consequence of the role and function of the office, but also of the organizational and personal dynamics. The latter considerations often overshadow the former, perhaps because role and function are not clearly defined for IR. The interpersonal skills and ability of the director to promote IR may replace or go beyond the more formal elements of the organization.

Figure 3

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH
AS AN ACTIVE AGENT IN POLICY MAKING
AND PLANNING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES



In the model being advocated it is the ***sine quo non*** that the head of IR report directly to the college president and be organizationally placed as a senior official. Where the institution is too small or lacks sufficient budget to support a full-time position, the responsibility should be given to a senior official, supported by at least part-time staffing to carry out research studies and data analysis.[31]

The position description for a director of IR and planning might read as follows:

> *Responsible for the development, coordination, and implementation of institutional research, planning, and evaluation activities for the institution. Research to include descriptive and operations studies. Planning to include institutional mission and goals development, policy development, cost behavior analysis, and marketing analysis. Evaluation to include programs and curriculum. Training should include knowledge of, and experience with, basic research techniques, statistics, data processing, cost analysis, organizational planning, and evaluation procedures. The director will report to the president and will sit as a member of the president's cabinet for institutional decision making.*[32]

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKING AND PLANNING

It is apparent that IR practitioners in education are treating more sophisticated issues in their developing role of researcher/planner. Some titles now reflect this merger, e.g., director of institutional research and planning. This is not an accidental merger, but a predictable consequence of events. The data necessary for long-range planning are at least as much external as internal, because it is the external environment that is placing increasing pressure on institutions to become more efficient and effective. The collector of these external data is typically the most able to interpret their meaning for the future. This is true partly because of educational training and partly because of educational experience. The researcher should be oriented toward education and trained in educational research techniques. These two characteristics separate the researcher from the business officer (the only other likely candidate for the role), who typically is not trained in educational research techniques and is usually from a school of business rather than a college of education.

The institutional researcher/planner, however, cannot and should not operate as if planning were solely the responsibility and domain of the IR office. Cooperation with the business officer is most important, and there must be close working relationships with the other principal members of the planning and decision-making body. The researcher/planner should coordinate the planning effort in a manner which conveys services to the institutional planning/decision-making team. The main function of education is still educating, and the researcher/planner who forgets this basic tenet will eventually find that the most useful planning data can go unconsidered if not perceived by the Office of Instruction as useful.

The major task facing the researcher/planner is the incorporation of external information into the ongoing formulation of institutional planning and management. The problem is one of overcoming the inertia of organizational structures that act suspiciously like bureaucracies. In most institutions this task requires strategies for innovative change. Lindquist has summarized five factors that incorporate strategies for planned change in educational institutions:[33]

- ***Informational and Interpersonal Linkage*** *– the personal connection between local leaders (in particular, faculty members) and outside individuals who are either expert or actually immersed in the desired developments, and knowledgeable of the latest socioeconomic and political trends affecting the institution.*

- ***Active Openness*** *– the active searching and hearing of others' opinions, both positive and negative, about the planned change.*

- ***Leadership*** *– the initiating and guiding of influential leadership in the direction of the planned change. Involving the influential leadership in the process of change. Combining the traditional expert and authority leader roles with those of open collaborator, linking agent, and facilitator.*

- ***Ownership*** *– the feeling of participation in the change activity.*

- ***Material and Psychic Rewards*** *– creating new, valuable experiences for participants in terms of personal and professional enjoyment, status and esteem, and promotions and tenure.*

Awareness of the above factors will not guarantee success in creating successful policy making and planning functions, but it will offer an option to certain failure. As Lindquist states, "R and D makes the critical error of assuming that people will change their own behavior because someone else sees the need, develops the solution and directs them or encourages them to do it. The solution may be fine for you, but it does not fit my goals and needs, my setting, my skills, my students."[34]

Another vehicle for improving the success of institutional planning and policy making is the budget cycle, the only process other than class scheduling that seems to occur "no matter what." Unfortunately, the budget process has historically led to simple incremental change, especially in bureaucracies.[35] Lyden suggests, however, that by isolating the different roles in the budgetary process, "qualitative policy changes can be effected . . . but only if it is recognized that decision makers at different stages of the budget cycle operate from different decision-making perspectives and therefore require different configurations of budgetary information."[36] For example, object expenditure (goods and services) data is necessary at the tactical decision stage and performance (input-output) data at the managerial and audit stages.

Equally important to getting the most useful presentation of data to the different decision makers (an example of IR and business office partnership) is the tying together of the budget and institutional goals. Without this connection, decisions are subject

to political constraints even in the face of overwhelming environmental pressures. The number of institutional closures in recent years is testimony to the pervasiveness of political solutions even in situations clearly calling for lifeboat ethics. Here, again, the IR office and the business office are logical partners in bringing the institutional data to bear on institutional purposes. With presidential and board support, the IR office can assist the institution in developing a mission statement and goals relevant to its service area population and environment. The business office can in turn develop a process of goal-related budgeting. The IR director who does not see a connection between his role and that of the business officer and the budget cycle is not likely to be an active agent in policy making and planning other than in a political manner.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

As resources become more scarce, it is certain that services not directly related to instruction will come under increased scrutiny. Such scrutiny is important and appropriate for institutional well-being. State funded colleges must compete against increasing demands from other social service agencies; private colleges must struggle to meet inflation-driven expenditures while attracting students to a more costly education. There is no evidence that the trend toward scarcity will change in the foreseeable future. Therefore, cost effectiveness is an important consideration for the IR office. Along with the president, the board, other administrators, and the faculty must receive evidence that the IR office is worth the cost. While IR may be in the ascendant, the very reasons for that ascendancy can bring about its decline if it is not able to demonstrate cost effectiveness in institutional management. As Hopkins noted, unless IR

> *wins its own way, not only with the central administration but also with the deans and faculty, to the point where it becomes an integral and natural part of the internal operations—both horizontally and vertically—and is timely welcomed by those responsible for line functions, it is doubtful if it justifies its own budgetary expenses or its own existence within the institution.*[37]

The principal way to demonstrate cost effectiveness or value to the college is through service to the constituency, which is, in this case, the whole institution. An effective IR office must seek out those programs experiencing difficulty in attracting students, serving students, or managing their resources, with the intention of working with management and faculty in developing information for planning creative solutions to the problems. Such service is unlikely to be effective, however, if attempted under the aegis of the office of the president. Presidential support must be of a general nature, authorizing the IR office to seek out problems that no administrator has confronted. While "it is the responsibility of the president to nurture the role of the researcher in planning, management and evaluation and to encourage its integrity in the face of competing political interests . . . institutional research staff must aggressively and insistently inject themselves into the mainstream of college management."[38]

Beyond contributing to college management, IR staff must actively seek participation in policy making and planning by demonstrating the soundness of their information and recommendations. IR should attempt to play a leading role in the efforts of the institution to effectively carry out its mission.

SUMMARY

Increasing Federal and state involvement in community college administration coupled with a changing student body and scarce resources have caused external and internal pressures for educational accountability. The role and function of IR have been undergoing rapid changes as a result of these pressures, and IR is coming to the forefront as a participant in the college management team. But IR should not be seen as a neutral collector and disseminator of information for the use of others in the policy making and planning cycle. The reality of the information gathering and interpreting process and the necessity of maximizing the professional resources available dictate that the IR director should be an active agent in policy making and institutional planning.

FOOTNOTES

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